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# **Chapter 1 - Situating ethics and values in social work practice**

**Trish Hafford-Letchfield and Linda Bell**

Social workers are one of the core groups of professionals prominent in public life and with an international identity. As we argue in this book, issues of ‘values’ and ‘ethics’ are highly topical and they are integral to current social work practice. These questions of values and ethics have become even more central to how social work operates in the context of relatively new systems of regulation of professional conduct, initially established by the four UK Care Councils, and continuing with social work’s recent inclusion within the Health Care Professionals Council in England. These bodies all developed documents and processes relating to professional ethics and values which are clearly concerned with the concepts, principles and behaviour that social workers profess in their day to day work (see also Banks, 2009).

This book has been written for social work students and professionals and will also be of interest to those in other related welfare professions. Building on theories of applied ethics and values, this book aims to examine how key areas of social work values and ethics can be meaningfully applied to specific practice contexts. There are already a number of quality texts on social work ethics (for example Banks, 2006; 2012; Clark, 2000; Beckett and Maynard, 2005; Hugman, 2005) and so in this text, we focus particularly on the application of various ethical theories for practice. Our contributors have aimed to document the importance of an understanding of ethics and values for inclusive practice within what we term the continuum of social work. This continuum starts at the point of entry to social work education through to the post-qualification stage of social work practice and beyond. Recognition of the importance of ethics and values in social work practice forms an essential part of social work internationally. The contribution of this text is in how we explore ethics and values in the context of every-day social work practice particularly in the UK, aiming to provide useful strategies, understanding and ideas for practice. These are explored through their application to a range of different scenarios involving day to day work with people who use social work services. We identify important theoretical debates linking issues such as reflective practice, social work identity/ies and social work education to ethics and values, with a central underpinning premise of social justice. We include some international perspectives, particularly in terms of the relevance of social work identity/ies to ethics and values.

Whilst we are not completely privileging one specific approach, our contributors certainly emphasise the kinds of approaches to ethics and values which humanise social work practice. You will see through the structure of the book that the first part (Chapters one to five) provides some grounding in ethics theories and principles and emphasises important debates around education, identity and reflection; the themes of chapters six to ten drill down into specific professional ideals/principles such as social justice, power, partnership and working with diversity that go beyond extant professional norms.

**Exploring ethics in social work practice**

The word 'ethics' is derived from the Greek word 'ethos', which refers to a person's character, nature or disposition and is used when making distinctions between right and wrong, or good and evil in relation to actions, volitions or the character of responsible beings (Leathard and McLaren, 2007). The terms ethics, morals and values are often used interchangeably; whilst the former is the one used most in relation to professional values and philosophies, it is nevertheless possible to make a distinction between these concepts, for example 'ethics' may be considered as the 'active' form of values (see Whittington & Whittington, Chapter 7, in this book). Clark (2006) makes specific reference to the 'moral character' of social work, a quality which goes further than the ability to be competent in one's role as a social worker but that also involves demonstrating a virtuous character; by modelling and subscribing to a way of life in tune with the choices of specific individuals or communities that we work with. Likewise Parton (2000) has described social work as a practical-moral act rather than a techno-rational action which requires a morally active practitioner (Parton, 2000). The idea of being morally active can be traced to Bauman's (1993) notion of a person's moral impulse which comes from within as opposed to acting in response to external imposed ethical frameworks. As large numbers of people involved in social care do not belong to a traditional 'profession' at all, there is always potential for conflict in understanding what we mean by 'ethics' and 'values'. Moves towards standardising frameworks and levels of training and education, for example, all need to contribute towards a consensus and 'ethics of care' from which a moral analytical framework and a basic moral language can emerge.

Applied ethics as a branch of philosophy is relevant to social work and this can cover a number of areas underpinning various aspects of social work practice. As we will see in chapter 2, Dracopoulou discusses dominant ethical theories particularly as being divided between consequentialism and as well as an approach based on the seminal work of Beauchamp and Childress (2001), focusing instead on the ethical principles of autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence and justice. Later in chapter 2 we are introduced to virtue ethics and what is termed an ethics of care. These more 'contextualised' ethics theories as discussed by Dracopoulou (see Chapter 4), and others (Grey, 2010; Orme, 2002) can act as a backdrop to critical social work, as they are drawing on feminism, race theory and other critiques that recognise economic and political domination. This will, according to Webb (2010) enable social work to cast itself in self-promotional terms both as an organized profession and directly as front line practitioners.

Values and ethics have increasingly taken a key position in social work policy, practice and education and are widely debated within the social work literature (Banks, 2006, 2012; Beckett and Maynard, 2005; Clark, 2000; Hugman, 2005). A number of what have been called spheres of values has been identified by some UK commentators in relation to aspects of social work. (See Whittington & Whittington, chapter 7, this book; see also Barnard, 2008; Powell, 2005; Shardlow, 2002). Barnard (2008) for example has identified what he terms four spheres of values: 1) 'moral philosophy' that forms 'a backdrop to ethical debates in social work'; 2) 'legislation' providing a 'context for social work practice'; 3) 'political ideologies', with the comment that these have differentially 'shaped...social work models,

methods and practices'; and finally 4) 'the historical emergence of social work as a profession and the struggle for a professional identity' (Barnard, op cit.p.6).

According to Clark (2006), the social work profession is first and foremost an enterprise imbued with moral purpose and values. Typically, practice has been more micro- or individually focused where the ability for such a focus calls into question the best ways of analysing and challenging ethical issues. However Clark (2006, p76) describes this as a 'fictional representation of the goals of social work practice' by reminding us that the potential of practice is profoundly conditioned by social and cultural circumstances often manifest in a broader structure of oppression, discrimination and inequality. This context mitigates any attempt at neutrality and therefore, as Clark asserts, it is necessary for social workers to be personally committed to values and ways of life that extend well beyond the scope of their contract of employment.

Some of these ideas are tested in the issues around 'suitability' for social work and 'fitness for practice' hearings by the regulatory bodies, as well as in the ways in which some organisational cultures have been interrogated to examine the way in which the physical, psychological and emotional environment has contributed to both successes and failures of care (Hafford-Letchfield et al, 2014). Banks (2009) for example has argued that the construction of professional integrity is not just about conduct that meets commonly accepted standards, but involves maintaining and acting upon a deeply held set of values, often in a hostile climate. Some of these ideas have been tested in more recent public enquiries and serious case reviews into failures of care whose findings have offered great potential for transferrable learning, to ensure a dignified culture of care.

There is arguably increasing emphasis in the literature on the relevance of philosophical theories (such as 'ethics of care') as a significant moral basis for social work and/or related occupations, grounded particularly in notions of 'virtue ethics' (noted by Barnard, 2008; see also Grey, 2010; Banks & Gallagher, 2009; Weinberg, 2010). This has clear implications for the processes of construction of social work identities (See Bell, Chapter 4, this book). Grey (2010) for example debates whether a feminist ethics of care, which he perceives as being close to virtue ethics, can be a more useful ethical stance for social workers than existing ethical principles: is this approach more able to address the complexities involved in the social problems with which social workers grapple? Does it offer more opportunities to deliver good quality outcomes for clients, or mutual respect than other existing ethical principles based on human rights and social justice? Graham (2007) draws our attention to black women's voices around the 'ethics of care', whilst Orme (2002, 2003) writing in some earlier commentaries, argues that it is unhelpful to dichotomise 'care' and 'justice', proposing that the principle of the 'ethic of care' ('the different voice') has: 'led feminist theory to reinterpret the principles and processes of justice in ways that are meaningful for social work and social care practice' (Orme, 2002: 812).

We argue here that students entering the social work will have already been asked to demonstrate their motivation and commitment during the process of recruitment and selection; on entering a learning environment within social work education they will have found it very different to more traditional ways of learning, one which involves encountering and reflecting on the 'self' as well as in relation to the professional roles they will play in the future. In this book we have sought to cover some of the issues involved in being and becoming a social worker, from entry to the profession and 'learning how to learn' from a base of an inclusive and a moral stance, to becoming a critically reflective practitioner using the enhancement of relationship based practice as a mode of being.

As members of a registered and regulated profession, and like many other human service professionals, social workers and continue to work within specific and clear lines of guidance in the form of codes of practice (BASW, 2012; GSCC, 2010; HCPC, 2012a, 2012b) and international statements of principles, (IFSW/IASSW, 2004). These are fundamentally statements of intent which spell out the ethics, duties and behaviour expected from both social workers and their employers. An analysis of similarities and differences in the structure and language of the IFSW/IASSW document compared with the BASW code, by Gilbert (2009), has situated them both firmly within the tradition of Western liberal ethics, whereas the latter is argued to pursue a stronger commitment to duty.

A range of case studies and situations, particularly from case-law and human rights perspectives (?) have transgressed some of these debates, particularly in the face of globalised economic downturns and the impact of prolonged austerity. For example, Cocker and Hafford-Letchfield (forthcoming) argue that concepts of anti-discriminatory practice (ADP) and anti-oppressive practice (AOP) which have been part of the social work landscape since the late 1970's, and which are essential and fundamental areas within social work education, practice and research, they have now become part of 'status-quo' thinking; they have long since lost their political edge. Substantial structural changes, various cultural shifts, new social movements and contemporary contests from within the critical tradition of social work continue to challenge the core assumptions of social work theory and practice to enable the development of new thinking. Statements of intent and codes of practice have not always been able to keep up with these challenges. There are also some practical objections to codes of practice, firstly through scepticism about how external professional regulation can be the best way of generating ethical conduct. Secondly, because they imply that a set of principles or practice guidance can meaningfully capture the complexity of ethical decision making, whilst they offer only a broad outline of some of the relevant issues. The third problem is that regulation and bureaucracy can arguably lead to defensive practice with an over-reliance on rules, and meeting obligations, rather than taking actions that are seen as morally right (Banks, 2006). Practice wisdom, knowledge and experience of reflective good practice are important ingredients in addressing these issues. .

The global development of agendas involving risk and governance has also increased over the past two decades: documented by writers such as Ulrich Beck since the 1980s, Western nations are said to have become engaged with the idea of 'risk' in many spheres of life, including professional practices (Adam, Beck, & Van Loon, eds, 2000; Webb, 2006).

Increasing focus on risk has been linked to the rise of neoliberal policies favouring economic growth in Westernized countries (Mudge, 2008). As the provision and delivery of care has become more sophisticated and determined by the impact of a globalised market economy, increasing technology and a greater consumerist orientation to social care, it can be argued that there is an even greater need to retain and defend a more reflective, philosophical approach to how care is produced and provided which goes much further than prescribed codes and guidelines (Leathard and McClaren, 2007).

Within this global context, the development of the international statement of values and principles has been a step towards establishing unifying framework for the social work profession worldwide, involving some seventy countries signing up. This statement has been influenced by universal declarations of human rights which cover civil, political, economic and social rights and aims to guide the practice of social workers as they seek to manage complex and dynamic situations in a broader context (Gilbert, 2009). Such commitment also has its challenges: Stanford (2010) has for example analysed how the rhetoric of risk is used within neo-liberal societies to mobilise fear as an emotive, defensive and strategic medium for advancing the values of safety and security. According to this discourse, Stanford argues that whilst taking risks has become integral to social workers enacting a moral stance, how we view ourselves, either in the context of personal or social relations:

“has become dominated by the legions of polarised identities that cumulate around notions of risk—dangerousness and vulnerability, independence and dependence, responsibility and irresponsibility, trustworthiness and untrustworthiness, culpability and innocence. Within this analysis, overwhelming fear operates as a core constituent for defining the personal experience of risk within contemporary society” (p.1066).

Webb (2010) reminds us that postmodern tendencies in social work can militate against a meaningful engagement with issues requiring recognition of social groups who are subject to differential exploitation and prejudice, and the consequences of the vast disparities within a stratified society. He therefore calls for an ‘ethical turn’ in social work that focuses on developing strategies aimed at creating a just society, echoing the broader aspirations of the IFSW/IAASW. Webb asserts that this sort of analysis is ever more pressing in light of the recent economic global downturn, the origins of which not only lie with fiscal developments but crucially, with the ‘structural imbalances associated with the processes of globalisation that have over-valued the role of the market and under-valued the institutions of social justice and citizens’ participation in economic affairs’ (Webb, 2010, p2365).

Returning the themes of risk discussed earlier, making sense of the politics of social work in its current context is a challenging task where very strong ideological positions have often been taken up in many cases, in relation to the emergence of quasi-markets in the public sector; here issues such as access to and direct privatisation of services now occur. Working within these rapidly changing ideological and instrumental environments poses real challenges for social workers in achieving autonomy for those with whom they work. Despite globalisation and technological advances, major factors influencing the human condition and circumstance across the world remain grounded in poverty and breaches of human rights

(Cocker and Hafford-Letchfield, forthcoming). Whilst social work may seek to alleviate many of the causes of poverty through its political action and direct support of those impacted upon, the way in which this is manifest in practice differs dramatically in global terms. The commitment to autonomy through the lens of social justice is one of the key tenets of social work that sets it apart from other professions.

Referring back to Beauchamp and Childress's ethical principles, beneficence is a term that means 'doing good' and non-maleficence means 'not doing harm': it is recognised that some social work activity may cause harm, for example by disproportionate intervention in some families. Achieving 'social justice' has been identified one of the most important aims of social work, not just through social workers acting fairly and within the boundaries of legislation, but through transformative critical action. Social workers may thus engage with circumstances that connect to a structural analysis of aspects of society that are oppressive, unjust and exploitative.

In social work we can appreciate how values link with engagement with professional bodies and their codes of practice. Ethical principles underpin governance, which is the framework that guides and monitors quality and equality, for example in the way services are designed, delivered and evaluated. Social workers are also expected to hold certain values. These are not free-floating, but they belong to a person, a team, an organization, a profession as well as to the wider society. Values are often framed in vision and mission statements, in lists of principles and in ethical guidelines. To think and act ethically requires a set of values and a mind-set that values other people (Dawson and Butler, 2003). Some commentators however have noted the problematic, conceptually vague and unsatisfactory way values are discussed in social work suggesting that their meaning needs more clarification. As organisations continue to face relentless new pressures to adapt, learn, innovate and constantly improve performance social workers need to keep up with rapid technological and other opportunities, and threats. These require greater integration across a range of organisational boundaries through increased collaborative or integrated working (Hafford-Letchfield et al, 2014). The latter has been accompanied by increased complexity as organisations consolidate and in many cases combine structures and resources to promote new ways of organising service delivery, with raised expectations coming from a consumer culture and amongst a complex array of stakeholder involvement.

Clark (2000) has tried to define social work values under four headings for example: 1) the worth and uniqueness of every person, 2) the entitlement to justice, 3) The aspiration to freedom, and 4) the essentiality of community. Despite these attempts at definition, as Gilbert (2009) reminds us, it is widely acknowledged that any attempts to pin down what we mean in relation to ethics and values in social work are often contradictory, competing and sometimes too abstract for practical application within contingent, uncertain and transient contemporary social environments.

### **Ethics and values in professional education**

Increasingly complex ethical and legal dilemmas in care, many of which involve working within interprofessional contexts, have drawn attention to the quality and quantity of teaching to professionals in this area (Whittington, 2003a; Whittington & Bell, 2001)). Therefore the inclusion of ethics and values will inevitably permeate professional training and continuing professional development. A sense of ethics and values should permeate institutional approaches to staff, students and communities within organizational settings focusing on delivering care, for example, the way in which people experience the culture and rules in the workplace. These issues have been well aired in serious case reviews and enquiries where significant links have been made with those imperatives that arise from poor workforce management, specifically; bullying, supervision and workplace stress-related illness, to serious compromises in the overall dignity and failure of care. The role of managerialist cultures in care organisations has been explored through the UK based Munro's report (2011) which offered a critique of the defensive process of risk management frequently observed in many social care organisations. According to Dawson and Butler (2003), ethical practice includes demonstrating probity and professionalism and the appropriate use of professional status and power on a day to day basis including in our relationships with colleagues. Formal and informal codes of ethical practice are there to govern rules about personal conduct and behaviour, confidentiality, consent and accountability and the way in which we collaborate and enable participation from service users, carers and the community (see also Rogers and Weller, 2013).

Students of social work, whether at pre- or post-qualifying level, may have to confront and 'unlearn' some of their personal values and beliefs as well as learning how to act morally and ethically. This means developing an ethical perspective that is good enough to help cope with the role and tasks that go with the job and an ethical approach that is robust enough to cover dilemmas and difficulties occurring at the front line. This means more than not succumbing to judgmental attitudes, but involves developing skills in creativity, physical and emotional integrity and having enough knowledge and expertise to maximize use of formal and informal structures that can represent the perspectives of service users, carers and communities.

Some of these issues are addressed by Hafford-Letchfield and Dillon in chapter three which talks about how ethics and values are incorporated into your education and training to be a social worker which according to the authors involves a lifelong learning approach. Grey (2010) for example has argued for the importance of social workers to at least have some grounding in moral philosophy, even though social work education has tended to steer away from this course. Through her examination of feminist ethics of care, Grey further posits that there are a number of limitations in current ethical theory and questions whether the relational ethics of care holds better prospects for delivering quality outcomes for clients than existing ethical theory in social work, which seeks universal standards of impartiality.

These are just some of the debates about how far a focus on ethics and values can address



‘the complexities of the problems with which social workers deal within the harsh practice environments in which social workers work, and where the ‘practice of value’ is becoming ever more difficult’ (2010, p1806).

These ideas are woven throughout this book within the various chapters from different authors and we make no apologies for some of the differences and debates that are subsequently raised within these contributions.

### **Summary of the themes and content of this book**

This book is divided into two key sections. Part one provides a general introduction to values and ethics from the perspective of the learner social worker, from pre-qualifying to qualifying social workers undertaking continuous professional development. In its first five chapters we provide an overview of ethical theories and links with values per se and as stated earlier we have prioritised those which promote professional roles/identity, inclusive practice and reflective practice. The chapters in part two go on to illustrate concepts such as ‘power’ and ‘social justice’, ‘partnership’ and ‘relationship-based practice’, using specific scenarios to apply these concepts to different aspects of social work practice. These chapters provide a number of case scenarios and tools, tips and suggestions to help you develop an ethical framework and key strategies when working within different practice situations, striving to balance related processes with social work values. Given the inter-disciplinary and multi-agency contexts of social work practice, we have written in a way that may lend itself to benefit other professionals within the wider field of social care, health and education, for example, doctors, nurses and allied health professionals or teachers.

#### ***Part one – Linking ethics and values to professional identity, inclusive and reflective practice***

Following this introductory chapter, we start in chapter two where Souzy Dracopoulou offers a review of the main theoretical approaches in the field of applied ethics with an emphasis on their potential application to social work. Developing social work ethics is a recent attempt to consider ethical problems and dilemmas that arise in the practice of social work in a systematic way and by appealing to philosophical thinking and methodologies. This chapter is an exposition of central theoretical trends and methodologies, but is also critical of mainstream tendencies that rely too readily on the direct application of certain ethical theories and principles to concrete moral problems, with the intention to analyse them and, where possible, resolve them. Dracopoulou thus reviews key approaches particularly consequentialism and deontology, and principlism. She then suggests other approaches that rely on a more particularistic or contextualized understanding of moral reasoning and justification (e.g. virtue ethics and ethics of care). In these approaches context, history, culture, character, virtue, relations as well as the notions of interpretation and comparative case analysis figure centrally.

In chapter three Trish Hafford-Letchfield and Jean Dillon consider the importance of values and ethics to those motivated to enter social work. Drawing upon theoretical ideas related to lifelong learning and life course development, this chapter asserts and illustrates the

importance of an understanding of ethics and values for inclusive practice particularly during social work education and training, and continuing into the arena of continuing professional development after qualifying. We will look at some of the debates about recruitment and retention in social work and the ethics underpinning emerging workforce development strategies. Concepts related to ‘experiences of being’ (Dalrymple and Burke, 2006: 5), and ‘becoming’ are explored to illustrate the centrality of continuity and consistency in attitude, behaviour and practice vis-à-vis inclusive practice and social justice. Some initial cases and questions are presented to illustrate the issues raised in this chapter.

In chapter four Linda Bell explores the relevance of values and ethics to the construction of ‘professional’ identity/ies in social work. She reviews recent literature relating to ‘professional’ identity/ies, taking the position that professional identity/ies are (re)constructed in practice rather than being completely fixed and unchanging. Bell explores how professional identity/ies in social work relate to individual practitioners as well as collectivities; she also considers whether there can be a single social work identity, or whether there are several. These processes are connected to issues of ethics and values, noting that for some, the individual practitioner is where any focus on identity and values should start. Bell suggests how inter-professional practice and working in different organizational / cultural contexts can help to shape social workers’ values and, therefore, professional identity/ies. This chapter notes increasing emphasis in the literature on the relevance of philosophical theories (such as ‘ethics of care’) as a significant moral basis for social work and/or related occupations, grounded particularly in notions of ‘virtue ethics’. It also widens the theoretical focus of the book in the final section to explore some international influences on processes of identity construction.

In chapter five, Pat Cartney focuses on links between reflective practice, ethics, and values, aiming to draw on issues raised in previous chapters to ‘problematize’ the nature of professional knowledge and ‘know how’ in social work. The complex, multi-layered knowledge held by practitioners is presented and explored. Practice knowledge is conceptualized as incorporating elements of both formal and informal knowledge. Links are made to the literature on reflective practice and the relationship between ‘internalist’ ways of knowing and more ‘externalist’ ways of justifying our actions, for example, by drawing upon research evidence. This chapter explores the nature of current tensions in social work and suggests that a more holistic, nuanced understanding of the nature of practice knowledge is required. Such understandings are of particular relevance in the field of applied ethics and values as professional judgments in this arena are often particularly complex and may require the balancing and prioritizing of different, conflicting interests and rights. Cartney gives us a case scenario and related questions to illustrate the issues she raises and to lead us into the themes covered in part two of this text.

***Part two – Themes for social work practice, ‘Power’, ‘Social justice’, ‘Partnership’, ‘Diversity and difference’ and ‘Relationship-based practice’***

In the second part of this text, we focus on ethical issues arising within different social work practice contexts and associated with specific concepts commonly cited in social work. In

chapter six Trish Hafford-Letchfield focuses on the concept of professional power and related ethical issues and dilemmas through closer examination of two familiar scenarios. She theorises competing discourses of empowerment in social work with particular reference to those encapsulated within UK government policy and examines key concepts around power and empowerment. Drawing particularly the explanatory powers of selected critical systems theorists such as Foucault (1980) and those from more radical traditions, she examines how power might be conceptualised within different levels of practice. The concept of power is problematised by explicitly drawing on user and carers' own accounts from the literature to demonstrate different external and internal influences on the root causes of disempowerment. Hafford-Letchfield then illustrates these through case studies on 'safeguarding' and 'vulnerability' in relation to how different service users are supported to make decisions about their own care and support, using more creative approaches (such as those involving narrative), and relationship based approaches. These, she argues, emphasise the centrality of experience, critical reflection, meaning making and importance of flexible and facilitative relationships within social work practice.

In chapter seven Colin Whittington and Margaret Whittington focus on the theme of 'partnership'. Their chapter has several main components: exploration of aspects of partnership and its place in policy and practice agendas, together with examples of evidence on partnership working ; consideration of ethics and values in social work and the location of partnership ideas within them ; discussion of practice scenarios, explored through the narrative of a single 'case' relating to an older adult, in which the authors identify particular spheres of partnership and collaboration, raise ethical issues relevant to partnership and suggest responses to them. Whittington and Whittington leave us with some reflective questions about the limitations of partnership, the importance of taking a questioning stance and the role of social worker in promoting commitment to service user-centred services within this agenda.

Tom Wilks applies the concepts of 'Diversity and Difference' to different practice scenarios in social work in chapter eight. There is discussion about how services users' unique social, ethnic economic and cultural contexts can be recognised and responded to both sensitively and appropriately. That diversity has a central place within social work practice is universally acknowledged in professional codes and underlying principles of practice, however without doubt, achieving such worthy goals for social work as a whole is not always straightforward in practice. Wilks considers two different ways that this concern with diversity manifests itself, both by reflecting this in the broader goals of social work as a professional activity (the headline statements of ethical codes of practice for example), at a macro level; and secondly in the specific roles and tasks undertaken by social workers at a micro level. The question of how diversity should be addressed by the profession as a whole (and by organizations providing social work services), a macro consideration, and how individual social workers should respond when faced with dilemmas concerning diversity as a micro level consideration, are interrelated and are illustrated by examples of practice dilemmas at both these levels. At a macro level important sources of such dilemmas are the question of how far social work should go in its commitment to supporting diversity and social change. The

issue of separate services of specific groups or inclusive services for all can also raise important challenges to social work values. At a micro level dilemmas can often revolve around what respect for difference means in practice.

Mina Hyare builds on some of this discussion, particularly in relation to the concept of 'relationship-based practice' in chapter nine. Taking a contemporary conception of relationship-based practice informed by psychodynamic, attachment and systems theory, she asserts that these provide a knowledge base for facilitating and enabling the development of highly sophisticated communication skills which can help work within emotionally charged situations and with service-users who can be hostile or resistant. Hyare provides some case material to illustrate the application of relationship-based practice asserting its superiority in developing professional confidence, maturity and so an ability to utilise discretion, which is important in achieving genuine change.

In chapter ten Alison Higgs takes forward the argument that being morally active encompasses not only individual conduct or personal belief but choices about participating in a broader social justice agenda which, she argues, should be at the heart of the contemporary social work endeavour. Taking up the macro debate, Higgs documents in more detail how neoliberal economic and social policy has influenced social work, asserting as it has the primacy of the market, whilst operating at an ideological level to affect those who need services. She suggests that furthering understanding about the meaning of social justice in the neoliberal context is vital, but this must be combined with political action in order to make changes. The political and philosophical nature of social work requires a definition of social justice that goes beyond an abstract 'thinking about' what a fair society would look like. Through case examples, Higgs illustrates how social work is about acting and doing, as well as thinking, and consequently social justice is something that needs to be struggled for as well as conceptualised. She makes a counter argument against current brutal neoliberal policies being inflicted on populations across the globe being inevitable and the only possible response to the crisis of world capitalism. Higgs concludes that there is an urgent need to develop a social work ethics which embraces both intellectual understanding and political action in relation to social justice.

In the final chapter, Linda Bell and Trish Hafford-Letchfield draw together the key arguments presented in the book. They explore the possibilities for social work values and identity/ies, based on social justice and critical reflexivity that can link or transcend different social work contexts, with suggestions for a possible practice-led ethical framework and key strategies to assist students and practitioners' ethical decision-making when working within different practice situations.

## **Chapter summary**

This chapter has provided a general introduction to how ethics and values are situated within the continuum of social work practices, including a discussion of some of the broader debates about what it means to social workers to 'act ethically'. The 'ethical' social worker is likely to be guided by a number of issues in their decision making, for example, awareness and

ability to recognise dilemmas and conflicts and how they arise; being aware of their values and having the capacity to reflect on their practice and to learn from it. Many of these issues will be discussed in the following chapters with the opportunity to consider examples of the types of ethical dilemmas that might arise for social workers in practice.

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